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ABSTRACT

In this study of the professional image of 21 preschool teachers in a single urban community, participants were first observed in program settings and later interviewed. Study findings are based on interview results. Teachers worked in six different types of programs (representing half day and full day care) and public and private nursery schools. All teachers were female, 19 to 66 years of age; educational level ranged from completion of ninth grade to master's degree level. Subjects were asked to name traits associated with being a "professional" and all but six referred to these four: adequate training, accreditation, work as a vocation, autonomy in decision making. Most teachers defined their occupational group as professional, and almost half the group described themselves as full professionals. Professional self image seemed directly attributable to the amount of education attained. A lack of teacher agreement on the ranking of basic goals in preschool teaching reflected the fundamental disagreement among leaders in the field. Lack of confirmation of the importance of shared values and norms appears to handicap development of a professional image. Findings suggest that development of a professional self image occurs relatively early in the process of professionalization. (NH)

The Professional Self Image and the Attributes of a Profession: An Exploratory Study of the Preschool Teacher

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In company with the many perspectives that have been brought to the study of the professions, symbolic interactionism has played an important part in guiding the researcher to basic issues and insights. The framework of this perspective has probably been summarized most succinctly in the title of the book by McCall and Simmons, Identities and Interactions. This book, which is a direct intellectual outgrowth of the theories of G.H. Mead, demonstrates the close connection between identities and interactions. Its main thesis is that our interactions are determined by our identities as much as our identities are constructed out of our interactions.

In the study of the professions, however, the application of this formula has been quite one sided. Most of the work has concerned "interactions" rather than "identities". Among "interaction" studies, one can distinguish three main types, depending on which member of the role set is a partner to the interaction. W.J. Good in his discussion of professions as a "Community Within a Community" implies an emphasis on colleague interactions. H. Becker in his article on "The Nature of a Profession" places his main emphasis on the professional's interaction with the client whom he serves. In Hughes' classic study of Men and Their Work the major referenent is the external community with whom the professional must interact in such a way as to validate his status by receiving his license and mandate to practice as he sees fit.

These three are only representative selections, not an exhaustive summary of an extensively studied subject. The other side of symbolic interactionism has not fared as well. There are relatively few studies of the "identity" of

professionals and these do not begin to add up to a systematic investigation of the subject. In part, this may be so because identities are more difficult to study than interactions. Identities may be likened to the submerged portion of the iceberg of symbolic interactionism of which the interactions are the visible part that can be studied relatively objectively by means of behavioral indicators. It is difficult to define identities apart from the interactions to which they give rise.

Nevertheless, it is important to make the attempt even though the results may be less clear, more fragmentary, and less readily interpretable. Two studies have made a serious beginning in analyzing this concept. Becker and Carper interviewed a group of graduate students in physiology, philosophy, and mechanical engineering concerning their work identification. They defined this identification in terms of four elements: the occupational title and associated ideologies, commitment to the task, commitment to the particular organization or institutional positions, and the significance of one's position in the larger society. They found that the would-be professionals in these three fields of study differed in important ways along these four dimensions.

M.J. Huntington studied the evolution of the professional self image of medical students. She found that the students gradually adopted the self image of doctor instead of student as they acquired increasing skill and self confidence through training. She also noted that the students' self image depended on the role of the partner to the interaction and on the situation in which the interaction took place. Students identified themselves more readily as doctors when dealing with patients than when dealing with other

doctors and when they felt that they were performing a significant function rather than when they felt they had little to offer.

Obviously, many unanswered questions remain. The present study represents an attempt to explore the following three questions: What is the content or meaning of a professional self image to members of a single occupational group? How is the professional self image distributed among members of the occupational group? Last, what is the relationship between assumption of a professional self image and the attitudes and behaviors commonly associated with definitions of a profession?

To carry out such a study it was important to choose an occupational group that did not belong to the "established professions, where professional identify and attributes would be presumed most evenly distributed. On the other hand, it was necessary that the group show serious aspirations and attempts to professionalize. It seemed likely that such a group would contain segments that had achieved different levels of professionalization so that comparisons among practitioners would show significant differences.

Preschool teachers, defined roughly as persons concerned with the group care and/or education of young children, primarily between the ages of three and five, fulfill these basic requirements. Although preschool teachers have been practicing for a long time, they were a rather small and unobtrusive group until the advent of Sputnik and the subsequent concern about maximizing educational opportunities for all. The Head Start program begun in 1965 focused national attention on the problems and benefits of early childhood education and vastly expanded the number of practitioners in the field. Since 1965 a total of 2.2 million children have attended Head Start classes alone. The general upsurge of interest in preschool education has also led to expansion

of facilities for more advantaged children of the same age. Preschool education is now so widely accepted that a realignment has occurred within the elementary school. The tasks that used to be performed by first grade teachers, which gradually devolved on kindergarten teachers, have now been shifted to the preschool level. Already a number of public school systems have incorporated preschool classes and this trend may gain momentum as elementary schools raise their expectations of entering students.

Under the general label of preschool teacher are included the well established highly trained professionals with masters or doctor's degrees in child development, certified elementary teachers who may or may not have taken specialized courses relating to preschool age children, as well as a large number of people with high school education or less. This latter group has been greatly augmented as a result of the Head Start policy of employing indigenous poor as teachers in their centers.

Enrollment in preschool education curricula is growing and an increasing number of states and institutions are laying down minimum standards for practice. Membership in the two major national professional organizations is increasing but because the organizations are not exclusively open to preschool teachers and because there is no compilation of work data on their members, it is difficult to tell what proportion of the increased membership represents preschool teachers. Various state organizations have prepared codes of ethics but none has, as yet, been adopted officially on the national level.

It is interesting to note that in a survey of the educational level of preschool teachers completed in 1946, it was found that the level of training was higher than that of elementary teachers in city school systems. More than half had earned at least one professional degree. The results closely correspond to educational level of junior high school teachers.

The findings relating to the professional self image of the preschool teacher, to be presented below, are the result of a small scale (N=21), intensive study of practitioners in six different settings in a single urban community. Nine worked in day care centers. Two of these were the only teachers in their respective centers, one of which was church sponsored and one private. Three worked together in a propriatary center, and four worked in a subsidized center for low income children. Of the twelve remaining, two worked in a cooperative nursery school where parents performed a major share of all functions, four worked in a non-profit nursery school, and six worked in a half day Head Start center. The study included teachers who also functioned as directors of schools, as well as head teachers and assistant teachers. They ranged in age from 19 to 66. All were female, in education they ranged from completion of an M.A. to completion of the 9th grade.

The study used a combination of participant observation and interviewing. Although the findings to be reported here pertain only to the results of the interviews, it is important to note that the interviews followed the observations. This meant that an informal working relationship between researcher and respondent had already been established before the interview began and the teachers could be motivated to give honest, thoughtful answers to questions that bore little relation to their everyday concerns. It also meant that when discrepancies arose in the answers given to different questions and between observations and interviews, these discrepancies could be explored and resolved. It would appear that this combination of techniques may have increased the reliability and validity of the data that resulted from the study.

What is a Professional Self Image?

Although there is a core of common traits that are found in almost all the models that define a profession, there is also a great deal of disagreement

among the experts concerning the major defining characteristics. Therefore, the following question was posed: If there is so much disagreement among even the experts, is there a common core in the definition of a "profession" as given by laymen? Second, is there any correspondence between the definitions given by the experts and by the laymen? These questions are fundamental because the would-be professional must achieve validation of his desired status by society at large. This validation depends on a shared definition of what is entailed in the concept of a profession. Furthermore, to the extent that our self identities are constructed our of shared meanings which underlie our interactions with others, our identities should be more stable if our definitions are more similar.

Accordingly, the sample of teachers were asked to say what they meant by the word "profession" or "professional". If this proved difficult, they were asked to consider a doctor or a lawyer as a prototype. Their answers are given in Table I. Of the 30 responses offered, all but six refer to four traits. In other words, there was a great deal of agreement among the members of this occupational group. The other interesting fact is that each of these answers would have been quite acceptable to the experts in the field. By itself, none of these traits would be considered sufficient to define the concept of "profession" but each would be considered quite valid. In other words, when a preschool teacher speaks of a 'profession' or a 'professional' he is probably referring to something that is not too different from what a sociologist means when he used that term.

The second step was to find out whether the teachers defined their occupational group as professional, whether they defined themselves as professional, and what was the relationship between their answers to the two questions. Table II cross tabulates these answers. Almost half the teachers described their

occupational group as unqualified professional and most of the rest gave a qualified response, "Yes, they are professional IF..." they fulfill certain requirements, usually related to their previous definition of the term. Only two teachers described their occupational group as non-professional.

In their description of themselves, again almost half said that they were full professionals but the rest were evenly divided between those who described themselves as semi-professional and those who described themselves as not professional. The table II shows clearly that these are independent questions. Only eight teachers gave themselves a similar rating to what they gave their occupational group. In 13 cases the answers differed. Eight gave the group a higher rating than they gave themselves and five gave themselves a higher rating than they gave the group. It seems apparent that researchers who plan to explore or use the concept of the professional self image must be careful to distinguish the referent. For this study it was decided to use the answers to the question referring to their definition of themselves as the main independent variable for the remainder of this report.

Who Subscribes to the Professional Self Image?

The question naturally arises whether those who described themselves as more professional differed in their demographic attributes or in their work setting from those who saw themselves as less professional. By far the clearest relationship can be traced between the professional self image and the amount of education. Although Table III simplifies the educational categories into two major ones, completion of a college degree or more, and less than college completion, the picture is not changed when finer categories are used for the analysis. It might have been supposed that the traditionally most professional preschool teachers, who have come through the child

development programs, would differ in this respect from those who have been trained in elementary education. This was not the case. Teachers who had completed their B.A. degree or more regarded themselves as more professional than those who had gone to college but had not graduated, and these in turn, regarded themselves as more professional than those who had attended only high school. Actually, the only person who defined herself as fully professional without having gone to college was one who felt that her ten years of experience as director of a day care center and her faithful attendance at workshops and study of literature provided by university consultants and by the licensing agency compensated for her lack of formal education.

The professional self image does not seem to depend on whether the practitioner works in a long day setting (day care setting) or in a short day setting (nursery school or Head Start), even though teachers in nursery schools frequently claim that those who work in day care centers are neither professional nor bona fide teachers (Table IIIb).

There is a somewhat stronger relationship between the socioeconomic status of the client group and the professional self image. Teachers who work with clients from a higher socioeconomic status tend to describe themselves as more professional than those who work with clients from a low socioeconomic status. However, this is in part an artifact of Head Start official recruitment policy. The guidelines for recruitment of Head Start staff insist that priority be given to the indigenous poor. The latter are relatively more likely to have finished no more than a high school education at the utmost, and these, in turn, are more likely to regard themselves as less professional.

These results further support Wilensky's conclusion that occupational training is more important than workplace orientation as a source of role orientation. This finding is especially interesting in this context because it was found

that some of the concommitants of professionalism, to be described below, were more closely related to work setting than to the professional self image.

What is the Relationship Between Assumption of a Professional Self Image and the Concommitants of Professionalism?

The various models of a "profession" usually include a list of attributes and behaviors that characterize its practitioners. Although there is some variation in these lists, there is also a core of common characteristics, five of which were investigated in this study of preschool teachers. These include the following:

1. Using peers rather than either clients or superiors as main reference group.
2. Belonging to professional organizations.
3. Keeping abreast of new developments in the field by reading professional journals.
4. Maintaining social contact with fellow professionals outside of the work situation.
5. Commitment of oneself to the profession for the forseeable future.

The 21 preschool teachers were asked various questions relating to these five attributes, with the following results. The first two attributes were almost totally absent among the group interviewed. Only two teachers chose peers for their main reference group. Five chose parents of the children taught. Six chose the children and eight chose their superiors. Only one belonged to an appropriate professional organization and she had attended no meetings during the past year. Their reading of professional literature was widely scattered even though almost all claimed to do some work-related reading.

The lack of interest in peers as reference group can be explained in part by the organization of the work settings. Many preschool teachers work essentially alone or in such small groups that there is no ready body of peers available. In other settings where several teachers are employed in the same school there may be no opportunity for interaction because the teachers work non-overlapping and non-continguous hours. Since the teachers did not belong to professional organizations they did not interact in that setting with other teachers who were members and who might have constituted a reference group of peers.

When the teachers were asked why they chose not to belong to the professional organizations, they usually answered that they felt that they did not have enough in common with other members. One partial explanation for this is that none of the appropriate organizations is reserved exclusively for preschool teachers. Either the organization is dedicated in a very general way to the education and welfare of young children and thus includes social workers, therapists, etc. or it is strictly a teachers' organization and preschool teachers feel that they have little in common with the bureaucracy oriented problems of elementary school teachers.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that many of the same teachers who rejected peers as reference groups and membership in professional organizations nevertheless maintained extensive extra-mural social contacts with other preschool teachers and reported discussing work related problems with these colleague-friends. Table IV shows that 16 of the 21 teachers claimed such contacts and those with a more professionalself image were more likely to follow this pattern.

These conflicting findings can probably be explained by the serious lack of agreement along these teachers on fundamental goals in their work. All espondents were asked to rank in the order of their importance the following

five goals, which represent different models of the basic function of preschool education:

1. To give the children basic information and other cognitive skills.
2. To give the children discipline and training in proper school behavior (socialization model).
3. To give the children good care and protection.
4. To identify and help the children with emotional and other special problems (therapeutic model).
5. To stimulate the children's native creativity and curiosity.

The answers showed widespread disagreement. For this group, the least acceptable goal was that of providing information. This is an indication that the new theories underlying compensatory education programs have not yet been widely accepted here. The old care and custody model was also rejected by almost half the group. The therapeutic model was about evenly valued and rejected. The stimulation model found more backers and the socialization model was supported by more than half the group. However, the spread in the rankings was more striking than the extent of agreement. Perhaps the most interesting finding is the difference in ranking by teachers in the same schools. Agreement between teachers was highest in the one school where parents played a key role in setting and executing policy and where the function of the school was a frequent topic of discussion at parent-teacher meetings. In other schools conflict among staff members seemed frequently related to this source of disagreement.

It should be emphasized that this disagreement is on a fundamental level. These rankings do not reflect differences in teaching style but in teaching goals. Sieber and Wilder used a close approximation to four of these five

models to explore differences in teaching style and to investigate preferences in teaching style by various members of the teachers' role sets. Their results indicated significant disagreement between styles preferred by parents and styles used by teachers. They predicted that these discrepant preferences would generate considerable conflict as parent power in the public schools increased through decentralization of school systems.

The crucial difference between the Sieber and Wilder work and the present research is that the former concerned methods of goal attainment, not the goals themselves. Elementary and high school teachers at least agree that their job is to teach the children certain information content. The widespread use of standardized objective tests underscores this basic agreement.

For the preschool teacher there is no objective standard because there is no agreement on what purpose the school should serve. Yet, despite the overall confusion, many parents and teachers have a decided personal preference among these five models. It would be very interesting to systematically investigate parent preferences at the preschool level and to compare these with teacher values. It might be predicted that a large discrepancy would be found especially between parents of lower socioeconomic status and child development trained teachers. Such a finding would help to account for the difficulty in communication between well trained teachers and parents of children in subsidized day care centers.

The disagreement among teachers on basic goals seems the most likely explanation for the findings on reference groups, professional organization membership and social contact with colleagues. Among preschool teachers there seems to be no guarrantee that others working in the same school share basic values. Therefore, such a peer group could hardly offer an acceptable judgment concerning

teaching effectiveness. The same problem applies to professional organizations since these do not at present represent a given point of view within the field. Most probably, the colleagues selected for social contacts would show greater similarity in their ranking of goals, which would also facilitate discussion of work related problems.

In line with the above, it should be noted that the professional literature read by the teachers was related to their sources of consultation. Those who had maintained or established contacts with child development specialists at a nearby university, read material recommended by them. Others who named the licensing agency as main consultants, read material recommended or distributed by them, and so forth. It can probably be assumed that these relationships again followed more closely patterns of value preference.

It seems clear that most of the preschool teachers showed a professional commitment to their work for the forseeable future. Table V shows that 14 of these 21 teachers made an unqualified commitment to stay in preschool education. Four were uncertain and only three said that they did not expect to be employed as a preschool teacher five years from now and/or that their ideal job did not involve preschool education. This commitment to the profession is closely related to the assumption of a professional self image. Only one respondent who described herself as a full professional expected to leave the field and only one person who described herself as non-professional was sure she would remain in the field.

Before leaving this discussion on social contacts and professional commitments, it should be noted that these two attributes are even more closely related to the teachers' work setting than to the professional self image. Table VI shows that all the teachers in long day settings maintained extra mural colleague contact and Table VII shows that of those nine who worked in long day

settings, only one was even uncertain in her commitment to the field. This finding is surprising for two reasons. First, the teachers with more education, who tended to see themselves as more professional, (Table III), were more likely to work in short day settings, (Tables IIIa and IIIb). Secondly, teachers who work in long day settings work longer hours for less pay and have less free time for outside contracts than those who work in short day settings.

The explanation may lie in the meaning of the work to teachers in different types of settings. A teacher who works in a day care center is more likely to derive her main source of satisfaction from the work situation, in the strong expressive bonds she establishes with the children and in her feeling of accomplishment at being able to bring about important beneficial results in the lives of the children. By contrast, teachers who work in part day programs tend to derive their main satisfactions from sources unconnected with their work. Many of them work only part time and choose the work because of the convenience of working very short hours. They are interested in their work and plan to continue but their involvement is less intense than those who work in long day settings.

Conclusion

It seems clear that in this sample of preschool teachers, the development of a professional self image is more related to educational attainment than to other attitudes and behaviors that are the usual concommitants of professionalism. Several interpretations can be offered for this finding. First, the content of training may provide the practitioner with the needed skills on which he can build his self confidence in the work situation and this, in turn, underlies his assumption of a professional self image. Data from the study do not support this hypothesis. Almost all the respondents described their training as of little value for their work. They almost all felt that their supervised field

work or in-service training, which constituted a small portion of the training of those with a B.A. or more, was by far the most useful for their work.

Of course, the reason for the lack of relevance of training can be traced again to the confusion about basic goals in preschool teaching. Ranking of goals was not clearly related to professional self image nor to the amount of education. The most important associations in this respect were found between training in child development and stress on stimulation of the child's creativity and curiosity, and a very low level of education and emphasis on discipline. The former represents a clear philosophy that permeates the text books and is strongly espoused by leaders in the field of child development. The latter may be a reflection of the patterns of authoritarianism among those with low levels of education. The content of training can only become relevant when there is a strong basis of agreement on basic goals and norms, when training reflects these goals, and when policy decisions in the organizations in which the teachers function also follow these guidelines.

A second explanation suggests that the training program may emphasize the desirability of professionalization and socialize the practitioners into assuming a professional self image apart from training in work skills. To some extent this is done in all professional training programs and may well be the case here.

Third, the training may be interpreted as a form of accreditation, which, in turn, is frequently cited as a characteristic of the professions. The emphasis on diplomas in the setting of standards is in line with this explanation and the number of times that training and accreditation were mentioned as definitions of a profession (Table I) would tend to support this point of view. This study

cannot point to a clear choice between these three interpretations.

From the weak relationship between the assumption of a professional self image and the concommitants of professionalism, one can draw two conclusions. One could deduce that the development of a professional self image occurs relatively early in the process of professionalization. Wilensky and others who have studied the stages of professionalization have not explicitly included this facet in any of their steps. The theory of symbolic interactionism would certainly lead us to believe that the establishment of a professional identity cannot come after the professional interaction patterns have been established. Maybe, it occurs before the development of a strong professional organization and the other accoutrements of professionalism. It would be interesting to explore this question further, both with larger and more representative samples of preschool teachers and with other groups of practitioners aspiring to professional status.

However, it is also possible that the preschool teachers present a unique set of circumstances in that the impetus and sophistication that are needed for professionalization are present but they are not strong enough to overcome the fundamental disagreement among leaders and practitioners in the field. This occupational group provides confirmation of the importance of shared values and norms as an essential prerequisits for professionalization. Either a group must develop consensus on the important issues facing its practitioners or it must formally agree to disagree by differentiating into clearly recognizable and organized professional segments as has been the case with medicine and psychiatry.

Table I

Definitions of a Profession by Preschool Teachers

Trait Named	Number of Times Trait was Mentioned
Adequate Training	9
Accreditation	6
Work as a vocation	5
Autonomy in decision making	4
Theoretical rationale for actions	1
Individualizing each client	1
Adding to body of knowledge	1
Code of ethics	1
Affective neutrality	1
Adequate salaries	1

*Respondents were free to name as many traits as they chose.

Table II

Preschool Teachers' Professional Self Image By Their Assessment of Professionalism of Their Occupational Group

How Professional Do You Consider Yourself?	Are Preschool Teachers as a Group Professional?			
	Yes	If...	No	Total
FULL	4	4	1	9
SEMI	3	3	0	6
NOT	2	3	1	6
TOTAL	9	10	2	

Table III

Professional Self Image and Educational Attainment

		Educational Attainment		
		B.A. or more	Less than B.A.	T.
Professional Self Image	FULL	8	1	9
	SEMI	1	5	6
	NOT	0	6	6
	TOTAL	9	12	

Table IIIa

Educational Attainment and Work Setting

		Educational Attainment		
		B.A. or more	Less than B.A.	T.
Work Setting	Long Day	3	6	9
	Short Day	6	6	12
	TOTAL	9	12	

Table IIIb

Professional Self Image and Work Setting

		Work Setting		
		Long Day	Short Day	T.
Professional Self Image	FULL	4	5	9
	SEMI	4	2	6
	NOT	1	5	6
	TOTAL	9	12	

Table IV

Professional Self Image and Contact With Fellow Practitioners

Professional Self Image	Contact with Fellow Practitioners: YES	NO	TOTAL
FULL	1	2	9
SEMI	6	0	6
NOT	3	3	6
TOTAL	16	5	

Table V

Professional Self Image and Commitment to Preschool Teaching

Professional Self Image	Commitment to Preschool Teaching: YES	UNCERTAIN	NO	TOTAL
FULL	8	0	1	9
SEMI	5	1	0	6
NOT	1	3	2	6
TOTAL	14	4	3	

Table VI

Contact With Fellow Practitioners By Work Setting

		Contact with fellow Practitioners		
		YES	NO	TOTAL
Work Setting	Long Day	9	0	9
	Short Day	7	5	12
	Total	16	5	

Table VII

Commitment to Preschool Teaching By Work Setting

		Commitment to Preschool Teaching			
		YES	UNCERTAIN	NO	TOTAL
Work Setting	Long Day	8	1	0	9
	Short Day	6	3	3	12
	Total	14	4	3	